

## Towards a Cultural Political Economy – not a Cultural IPE

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### *Abstract*

This short article provides a response to Matthias Kranke's [review](#) in this journal (vol. 42, no. 3) of our book *Cultural Political Economy*. Although we recognise the good intentions behind Kranke's attempt to bring our book into ongoing 'trans-Atlantic' debates about the definition of International Political Economy (IPE) as a field, the very effort to define what IPE 'is' and 'is not' is precisely the kind of reifying move that our volume was trying to avoid. Our project is principally an ontological one: we try to make sense of what political economy would look like if we took seriously the role of culture. This allows us to cut through the epistemological debates that have historically defined IR and the methodological ones that have recently dominated IPE.

It is always gratifying and flattering to receive the sort of attention that Matthias Kranke gave to our book, along with that of Shields, Bruff and Macartney. Kranke has given both books the sort of detailed and thoughtful reading that any scholar would appreciate. Nonetheless, as Roland Barthes pointed out when he wrote of the 'death of the author,' while we may think 'we' write books, we cannot control the meanings that they take on as they are read and circulated.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Kranke's reading of our book contains a number of claims that surprise us and that we seek to engage with here.

Although we recognize the good intentions behind Kranke's attempt to bring our book into ongoing 'trans-Atlantic' debates about the definition of International Political Economy (IPE) as a field, the very effort to define what IPE 'is' and 'is not' is precisely the kind of reifying move that our volume was trying to avoid. The goal of our project was precisely *not* to create a new theory, school or approach that could then be put into contention with other such perspectives within something called 'IPE'.

One important clue is the simple fact that book is not called *Cultural IPE*, but rather *Cultural Political Economy*. We set out to develop a project that resists the conventional

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Death of the Author', *Aspen*, no. 5+6 (1967).

boundaries of IPE by bringing culturally-inflected IR scholars and cultural economy scholars (most of whom are geographers or sociologists) into the conversation. While some of our contributors do have a background in IPE, we also consciously involved authors from varied disciplinary backgrounds.

If cultural political economy is not a new school of approach, then what is it, or perhaps more precisely, what does it do? Shields, Bruff and Macartney suggest that it is dangerous to undertake the methodological disputes at the core of the debates on the “American” and “British” schools without paying attention to their ontological dimensions.<sup>2</sup> Our project is principally an ontological one: we try to make sense of what ‘political economy’ would look like if we took seriously the role of ‘culture.’ This allows us to cut through the epistemological debates have historically defined IR and the methodological ones that have recently dominated IPE.

More importantly, an attention to the role of culture in political economy allows us to understand a multitude of different empirical phenomena that resist narrower forms of analysis. Whether we want to understand the political economy of migration, surveillance, tourism, the origins of embedded liberalism or the transformation of labour (all themes addressed in the book), we have to pay attention to the cultural constitution of economic practices.

To attempt to rein this rich and open-ended project back into being about constructing a new approach within the relatively narrow confines of IPE would seem to us a mistake. The question of what IPE is and should be is ultimately much less interesting and important than the task of developing and deploying theories and methods for understanding the concrete phenomena and problems explored in our book.

Kranke’s parliamentary metaphor (in which orthodox IPE is the government majority, cultural IPE (*sic*) is the parliamentary opposition, and critical IPE is the extra-parliamentary opposition) is thus particularly inapt. We are not interested in “run[ning] things differently from within the established institutions.” While the various self-defined factions within traditional IPE may see it as useful to battle it out in parliament, we are busy gardening.

We chose this alternative metaphor not for its absurdity (which we will admit we enjoy), but because it draws inspiration from Zygmunt Bauman’s distinction between gatekeeping and gardening as modes of governing.<sup>3</sup> Kranke’s parliamentary metaphor is about gatekeeping: governing seeks to define who is to be included in and excluded from IPE as a field. A gardening metaphor is much more apt for what we were trying to do and how we might use the various ideas in what gets called IPE: as spades, trowels and rakes that enable us to carefully sow seeds, tend and nurture them, identify weeds and bugs that

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<sup>2</sup> Stuart Shields, Ian Bruff and Huw Macartney, eds, *Critical International Political Economy: Dialogue, Debate and Dissensus*, Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave (2011), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*, Cambridge: Polity (1987).

need to be removed, and reap the rich harvest, in a process of iterative, reflexive learning about the world.

Tending an intellectual garden nevertheless involves processes of inclusion and exclusion. Kranke's charge of Eurocentrism thus has some merit. Certainly, in terms of the contributors to the book, we accept the charge. However, a good half of our chapters deal explicitly with imperialism and at least one (by Helleiner) explicitly focuses on Southern agency, the issue that Kranke identifies as a key problem. The consequences of such exclusions are also less serious if the goal is to tend one interesting garden among many (as we sought to do) than if the objective is to construct a new, more inclusive but nonetheless authoritative discipline.

Why does all of this matter? It is only by continuing to evolve that international political economy will remain an important field of study. If we want to continue attracting strong students and enriching our scholarship, then we need to stop obsessing about disciplinary boundaries and open ourselves up to what is going on around us, both intellectually and empirically.